**Lesson 05: Language, society and Culture**

**Introduction:**

Sociolinguistics is the study of the relationship between language and society, of language variation, and of attitudes about language. It also studies how language varieties differ between groups with different social backgrounds like different ethnicity, religion, status, gender, level of education, age, etc., and how people can be categorized into different social classes. The authors try to know whether the sociolinguistic background of a child influences the child’s understanding and speaking of language[[1]](#footnote-2)

**1-Language and Culture:**

There is a tradition of study in linguistic anthropology which addresses the relationship between language and **culture**. By ‘culture’ in this context we do not mean ‘high culture,’ that is, the appreciation of music, literature, the arts, and so on. Rather, we adopt Goodenough’s well-known definition 1957: ‘a society’s culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and to do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves.’

Such knowledge is socially acquired: the necessary behaviors are learned and do not come from any kind of genetic endowment. Culture, therefore, is the ‘knowhow’ that a person must possess to get through the task of daily living; for language use, this is similar to the concept of communicative competence

. The key issue addressed here is the nature of the relationship between a specific language and the culture in which it is used. [[2]](#footnote-3)

**Directions of influence :**

There are several possible relationships between language and culture. One is that social structure may either influence or determine linguistic structure and/or behavior.

Certain evidence may be adduced to support this view. For instance, given the evidence of the **age-grading** phenomenon (i.e., young children speak differently from older children, and, in turn, children speak differently from mature adults), we could argue that the social organization of age groups influences the language used in these groups. Another possible piece of evidence for this direction of influence is studies which show that the varieties of language that speakers use reflect such matters as their regional, social, or ethnic origin and possibly even their gender.[[3]](#footnote-4)

Since every language is concerned as medium, it communicates the message or information from one to another. Any culture can be seen through the nature of society, but all the time it is not possible. If anyone wants to learn any particular culture, it is possible through literature. Sociology describes the relationship between human and society, the categorization of race, beliefs and common culture, and social constancy. Clarie Kramsch aptly quotes: ‘The first insight relates to culture as semantically encoded in the language itself; the second concerns culture as expressed through the actual use of the language’ . A society time to time faces evolutions accordingly it can be found new features in the language, because both are not static. Hence, language is in a constant state of change until it has ceased to be spoken or has become a dead language. [[4]](#footnote-5)

In any culture, there can be many changes according to its developments that certainly reflect in the society and language respectively. Since language and culture are always not constant, it is necessary to update the changes accordingly in the language policy. Relevant to this fact Nancy H. Hornberger, and Dr. Sandra Lee McKay aptly comment: ‘Popular culture is also not an easy

object to study in itself. Unlike less popular forms of culture, it does not stay still for very long. This is an issue both for research and for a pedagogical engagement with popular culture, since what is popular today may not be so tomorrow’ . [[5]](#footnote-6)Corresponding to the point either the first or second language should be taught relevant to present phenomenon and prerequisites of the learners. Moreover, the learners ought to learn the pragmatics of the respective society that only makes them convenient when they meet real life situation. Formal learning may help learners in basic but they cannot always communicate all through the basics. Because the function of language in a society is different from the classroom learning, to overcome this issue the pragmatics and the aspects of sociolinguistics should be inculcated in the language classroom itself. [[6]](#footnote-7)

In day-to-day communications everyone can see social and cultural roles hence these processes are so deeply entrenched in their life that cannot be always noticed. Language cannot be separated from customs that are from the communally innate behaviours and beliefs which determine the consistency of human’s life. George Yule says: ‘language is passed on from one generation to the next is described as cultural transmission. While it has been argued that humans are born with an innate predisposition to acquire language’ Likewise, ethnicity and language are indivisible because culture not only states who talks to whom and how the communication happens, further it facilitates to find out how speakers encode the message, the meanings they indented, the circumstances under which various information possibly be sent or interpreted, subsequently culture becomes the foundation for communication.[[7]](#footnote-8)

**2- LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY:**

Language plays inevitable roles in a society and the relationship either is widely rooted. Every social change makes changes in language which incorporate the social values within its parameter. Similarly language and society have a mutual association: language determines the social interactions and social relations build the language. Sociolinguistics studies the effect of society in cultural norms, and divergent contexts, the way language is used and the effect of language on society. Relevant to this point George Yule comments: ‘It is important not to overlook this social aspect of language because, in many ways, speech is a form of social identity and is used, consciously or unconsciously, to indicate membership of differ social group or different speech communities. A speech community is a group of people who share a set of norms, rule and expectations regarding the use of language’ . [[8]](#footnote-9)

To study the human society without language is very hard and without society is no means of evaluating the history of any language. The Interactionist sociolinguistics is principally interested in what language use can state about social processes and therefore a central concern is the social meaning of language use. Mc Iver and Charles observe: ‘Man’s relation with the society is so intimate and close that it is very difficult to isolate him from the environment in which he is born, nurtured and grown to be a man’. Language is central to one’s identity as an individual and as a marker of a social group.

The use of a particular language variety indentifies as everyone belongs to a particular social group. It is the flesh and blood of a human culture. David Crystal has expressed: ‘Language is the repository of the history of a people. It is their identity. Oral testimony, in the form of sagas, folktales, songs, rituals, proverbs and many other practices, provides us with a unique view of our world and

a unique canon of literature’ .

The American linguist William Labov is wellknown for quantitative Sociolinguistics, which mainly concerns on the study of language variation and change. [[9]](#footnote-10)

Further his difference hypothesis aimed at the explanation of all linguistic variations caused by the involvement of social factors. His study illustrates the relevance of social determinants of linguistic variations and their correlations with the social structure. Correspondingly, he recommended a social approach to language through his sociolinguistic model in which the linguistic theorization is linked with the society. In this view R.A. Hudson defines:

‘Since speech is (obviously) social behaviour, to study it without reference to society would be like studying courtship behaviour without relating the behaviour of one partner to that of another’ . According to their views language has been classified as vernacular, dialect, idiolect, discourse, register, sociolect, slang, topolect or regional dialect. So, while framing curriculum for language it is necessary to integrate the features into curriculum.[[10]](#footnote-11)

We must acknowledge that a language is essentially a set of items, what Hudson 1996 calls ‘linguistic items,’ such entities as sounds, words, grammatical structures, and so on. It is these items, their status, and their arrangements that language theorists such as Chomsky concern themselves with. On the other hand, social theorists, particularly sociologists, attempt to understand how societies are structured and how people manage to live together.

To do so, they use such concepts as ‘identity,’ ‘power,’ ‘class,’ ‘status,’ ‘solidarity,’ ‘accommodation,’ ‘face,’ ‘gender,’ ‘politeness,’ etc. A major concern of this book is to examine possible relationships between ‘linguistic items’ on the one hand and concepts such as ‘power,’ ‘solidarity,’ etc. on the other. We should note that in doing so we are trying to relate two different kinds of entities in order to see what light they throw on each other. That is not an easy task. Linguistic items are difficult to define. Try, for example, to define exactly what linguistic items such as sounds, syllables, words, and sentences are. Then try to define precisely what you understand by such concepts as ‘social class,’ ‘solidarity,’ ‘identity,’ ‘face,’ and ‘politeness.’ Finally, try to relate the two sets of definitions within some kind of theory so as to draw conclusions about how items in these two very different classes relate to each other. Do all this while keeping in mind that languages and societies are constantly changing. The difficulties we confront are both legion and profound. [[11]](#footnote-12)

There are several possible relationships between language and society. One is that social structure may either influence or determine linguistic structure and/or behavior. Certain evidence may be adduced to support this view: the age-grading phenomenon whereby young children speak differently from older children and, in turn, children speak differently from mature adults; studies which show that the varieties of language that speakers use reflect such matters as their regional, social, or ethnic origin and possibly even their gender; and other studies which show that particular ways of speaking, choices of words, and even rules for conversing are in fact highly determined by certain social requirements. [[12]](#footnote-13)

A second possible relationship is directly opposed to the first: linguistic structure and/or behavior may either influence or determine social structure. This is the view that is behind the Whorfian hypothesis , the claims of Bernstein , and many of those who argue that languages rather than speakers of these languages can be ‘biased. A third possible relationship is that the influence is bi-directional: language and society may influence each other. One variant of this approach is that this influence is dialectical in nature, a Marxist view put forward by Dittmar (1976), who argues that ‘speech behaviour and social behaviour are in a state of constant interaction’ and that ‘material living conditions’ are an important factor in the relationship.[[13]](#footnote-14)

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| Abolfazl Mosaffa Jahromi1 & Mahmoud Mobaraki2\*  |

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